Visceral Methodologies, bodily style and the non-human

James Ash, james.ash@ncl.ac.uk

Accepted manuscript in Geoforum, available early online:
doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.03.015

Viscerality is often associated with a biological, human body. The visceral can refer to a felt sense of the internal organs of the body, such as our hearts beating in our chests, or a basic form of emotional response to a situation, popularised in phrases such as having a 'gut feeling'. While an emphasis on the visceral would seem to suggest that bodies are the key site or organiser of experience, in this short reflection I want to suggest that bodies are a medium that can be used to bring background or previously undetected non-human objects and forces to the forefront and so enable them to be studied and analysed. This is an important aim because, as I show in two vignettes below, many non-human objects and forces that make up human environments are hidden from view, but are nonetheless key to shaping the people that live in those environments.

To understand non-human objects through the body, visceral methodologies can be conceptualised as a style of bodily comportment in which human bodies are a conduit for the expression of non-human objects and forces. As Young (1980) suggests, comportment is a general term for a form of bodily conduct or bearing upon the world. According to Young, our comportment is shaped by a whole host of social factors, such as age, class or gender. Just as we learn to comport ourselves in different styles depending on how we are socialised, I argue that we can develop styles of comportment that work to allow non-human entities to express themselves in ways that bring them to presence and make them available for social scientific study.

To illustrate and unpack how the practice of bodily styles can allow the non-human to express itself, we can think about a skilled guitar player and how they approach their instrument. From a technical perspective, playing guitar involves placing fingers on the fret board in different combinations alongside plucking or strumming the strings to create notes or chords. But, when a skilled player such as Tom Morello picks up the guitar he does so much more than this. His guitar parts are often technically simple, but are known for the tone and feel he produces through his guitar. Watching Morello perform, one's attention is drawn to the way in which his whole body is implicated in the sound and tone and how his sound is always produced in concert with his guitar. His whole body works the instrument, not simply his hands on the strings, creating an affective feedback loop between guitar and body.

With this in mind, I would argue that his bodily movement is not just a performance of movement for an audience, but a performance of movement for the guitar and the sounds the guitar produces. In other words, his bodily movement is not an addition 'on top' of the

sound created. Instead much of his bodily movement is integral to the sound that is produced by the guitar. Rather than stating that Morello is the author of the sounds his guitar makes, we might instead suggest that he uses his body as a conduit for the expression or manifestation of the non-human materials and forces of the guitar. In the case of the guitar, these materials include the guitar as an amalgamation of metal, wood, electricity, capacitors and other parts, the guitar lead, the guitar amplifier and the many effects pedals that can be used to manipulate the sound of the guitar.

To understand the non-human elements of a situation, visceral researchers could become more like musicians and develop bodily styles of comportment that enable the disclosure of non-human forces from the objects that are implicated in their area of study. Just as we can identify how the movement of Morello's body introduces rhythmical intervals that feed into and potentialise the sounds that emerge through the guitar, we can use our bodies to understand how non-human objects shape human situations and interests. For example, this approach could be used to interrogate the decision-making processes regarding individual food choice. Through developing a visceral methodology, we can attend to the allure of certain products in a way that goes beyond understanding them solely through the neurochemistry of taste or a representational analysis of marketing. In the case of, say, a can of Pringle crisps, a visceral methodology would instead invite examination of how the crisps sit within their cardboard tube and how this encourages an arm to comport itself to reach inside. Just as a guitar can be made to resonate, how does it feel to pull the lid from the tube and what sound do the Pringles make as they slide down the interior of the tube? Rather than a body with agency that chooses to consume Pringles, we can develop styles of comportment to think about how the tube and crisps express an allure that is attuned to one another as much as the human body that engages with the can.

Through these short vignettes, I have suggested that focusing on the viscerality of bodies allows us to develop new styles for thinking and feeling non-human objects. In particular we can begin to consider how objects appear to us through the ways in which they are comported to one another. In summary, visceral methodologies are important because they can be used to cultivate practices that enable non-human forces (which are often ignored in social scientific analysis) to come to the forefront.

References

Young IM 1980 Throwing like a girl: A phenomenology of feminine body comportment motility and spatiality *Human studies* **3** 137-156